DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 358 RC 015 116

AUTHOR Butler, Lorna Michael; Howell, Robert E.
TITLE Community Needs Assessment Techniques. Coping With Growth.
INSTITUTION Oregon State Univ., Corvallis. Cooperative Extension Service.; Western Rural Development Center, Corvallis, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY Extension Service (DOA), Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO WREP-44
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 23p.; For related documents, see ED 225 754-755, and RC 015 106-117. Document printed in colored ink throughout.
AVAILABLE FROM Western Rural Development Center, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331 ($1.00).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; Biographies; Case Studies; Census Figures; *Community Change; *Community Study; Community Surveys; Content Analysis; *Coping; Delphi Technique; Leaders Guides; Meetings; *Needs Assessment; Participant Observation; *Population Growth; Public Opinion; *Research Methodology; Resource Materials; Rural Areas; Social Networks
IDENTIFIERS *Impact Studies; Key Informant Approach; Nominal Group Technique; Vital Statistics; Washington

ABSTRACT

Designed to help local government officials, agency personnel, and members of citizen groups involved in the planning process for a rapidly growing community, this introduction to community needs assessment provides background information on the reasons for conducting community needs assessment, guidelines for determining which techniques are most appropriate, and a brief description of 13 different needs assessment techniques. Advantages and disadvantages of each method are given plus a list of references. The techniques include use of census and vital statistics records, content analysis, participant observation, case studies, social network analysis, surveys, key informants, life histories, nominal group process, delphi technique, advisory groups and task forces, community forums, and community impressions. Although a community needs assessment is an excellent means of involving the public in problem solving and developing local goals, the guide stresses the need to use multiple methods when carrying out a needs assessment--or many people and potential problem areas will fall through the slats. A brief, closing example illustrates how needs assessment techniques were used in Creston, Washington. (BRR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

JAN 1985
RECEIVED

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

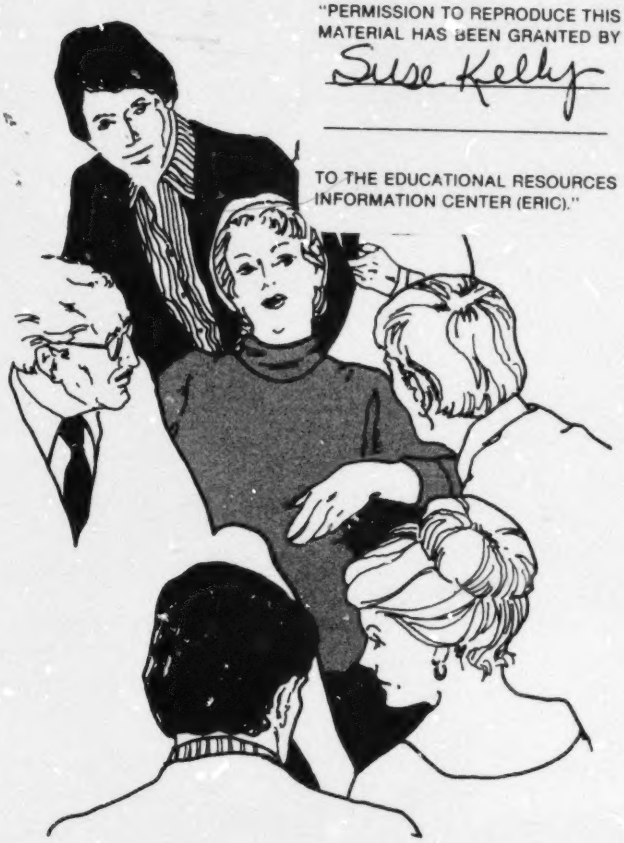
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED252358

RC015110

Coping with Growth

Community Needs Assessment Techniques



"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Susie Kelly

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Lorna Michael Butler,
Extension Community Development Specialist,
and
Robert E. Howell,
Extension Sociologist,
Washington State University

WREP 44 October 1980

WRDC
Western Rural Development Center
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97331
(503-754-3621)

A regional center for applied social science and community development cooperating with Land Grant Universities in:
Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Responsiveness to citizen preferences, concerns, and needs is a basic fundamental of American democracy. In many situations, law requires that the needs of a community be studied prior to the development of policies and programs in areas such as land use, transportation, and health care planning.

This introduction to community needs assessment provides background information on the purposes for conducting a community needs assessment; guidelines for determining which techniques are most appropriate; and a brief description of 13 different needs assessment techniques, including the advantages of each method and a list of references to which the reader can go for further information. It should be helpful to local government officials, agency personnel, and members of citizen groups involved in the planning process for a rapidly growing community.

Purpose

There are several reasons why citizen groups, public officials, and agency representatives should secure accurate information about the needs of a community.

All communities are in a continual state of change—through births and deaths of citizens, through people moving in and out, and through the natural growth and development of each individual citizen over time. As a consequence, what once may have been an appropriate policy or program can soon become inappropriate. The character or mood of a community can make many shifts as a result of the interplay of social, cultural, and economic changes.

The needs of different groups of people in a community are difficult to identify—and frequently interrelated. In many instances, people do not express their attitudes and feelings openly; sometimes community needs are not revealed until a crisis occurs. When public concerns appear to correspond with the responsibilities of several agencies, no one agency may identify specific concerns or needs as high priority, and the result may be no action.

The needs of people in rapidly growing communities may be overwhelming. Local government resources may be limited and public demands may be high. This makes priority setting and long range planning essential. However, such planning and action cannot be carried out effectively without accurate and up-to-date information about citizen needs and preferences.

A community needs assessment is an excellent means of involving the public in problem solving and developing local goals. There is a tendency for people to resist change—frequently because they have inadequate information, or because they have not been involved in making decisions. A needs assessment can therefore be viewed as a process of citizen involvement whereby people not only learn more about the situation, but they also feel that they have had a voice in the outcome.[1]

In a rapid growth situation, needs assessments can help local leaders ease the impacts of growth. This information can be especially helpful for:

- Learning more about the present residents and how they will be affected by growth—newcomers in their neighborhoods, new or expanded job markets, crowded schools, new leadership responsibilities, changing traffic patterns;
- Learning more about newcomers—who they are, their specific needs and concerns, how they may be affected by moving into the community;
- Identifying needs for new or expanded public services;
- Assessing public opinion about community goals and priorities;
- Systematically evaluating existing programs and services and planning for improvements;
- Providing justifications or explanations for budget and grant requests;
- Increasing citizen understanding of community problems and their effects on people and organizations in the community;
- Building increased citizen support for public decisions, in that citizens develop a greater "sense of ownership" through involvement;
- Increasing citizen awareness of community planning, including availability of resources.

[1] For additional information, see: Nelson M. Rosenbaum, *Citizen Involvement in Land Use Governance* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1976); George J. Warheit, Robert A. Bell, and John J. Schwab, *Needs Assessment Approaches: Concepts and Methods* (Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1977); U.S. Department of Transportation, *Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. I, Community Involvement Processes* and *Vol. II, A Catalog of Techniques* (Washington, DC: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976); Robert W. Haberston, ed., *Pathways to Data: Field Methods for Studying Ongoing Social Organizations* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970).

3

Selecting a Technique

The quality of information about a community is only as good as the technique or combination of techniques used. A single technique may be too narrow in the information it provides; using too many methods may be costly in terms of time and dollars. Different information-gathering techniques are appropriate for different needs. Analyze the situation and the most significant questions being asked, then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of several techniques. Sometimes a combination of several techniques will provide a reasonable picture of:

- What your community is like—characteristics of people, types of organizations, values, beliefs, goals, concerns, and problems;
- Comparison with other communities;
- What is unique about your community.

When gathering information about impacts of a particular project or population change, remember to include data on both the local setting and the sources of impact. In a sense, information must be obtained about two communities—the permanent local residents and the newcomers with a new development. How will the change affect or continue to affect people in the community?

The following guidelines should be helpful in choosing one or a combination of several needs assessment techniques.

The problem. Narrow the focus. If the problem is not well defined, the study may become unmanageable. At the outset, particular techniques such as a citizens' advisory group, a steering committee, a community forum, or a mail questionnaire can provide a sharper perspective on local concerns. Define the problem and assess its manageability.

- What do we want or need to know?
- Why do we want to know it?
- How will the information be used?
- Where can we find the information needed to answer our questions?
- How can we obtain this information?
- What useful information sources already exist at local, regional, state, or federal levels?
- How can the data we obtain be organized, analyzed, and presented?
- What people and organizations should be involved in gathering the information? Why? How?

The cost. Try to determine how much it will cost in time, dollars, and other resources to obtain the needed information. Consider what money is available, or where financial help could be obtained. Also, estimate the availability of human resources—for planning, compiling, analyzing, and presenting information. If citizen volunteers are the primary means of carrying out the study, they may need to be reimbursed for their expenses, their time may be limited, and they may need guidance and support. On the other hand, highly skilled researchers can be found in the volunteer community. Do not overlook agencies, organizations, and businesses that may be interested in the problem. The total community is a potential resource.

The leader. Even though the needs assessment project may have a capable steering committee or the support of local officials, it needs leadership. Determine who is available to assume responsibility for the needs assessment and what their capabilities are to get the job done. Someone needs to be responsible for all the tasks associated with planning, defining the problem, monitoring the expenditure of funds, organizing a plan of operation, guiding the data collection, and serving as liaison. Leadership also includes overseeing data analysis, its presentation, and its use.

The leader does not need to have all the answers or do all of the work. However, he/she should be able to organize, know how to maximize the involvement of all community resources, and understand the research methods used in conducting a needs assessment. At no time is a leader a substitute for community participation. With the right kind of leadership, occasional consultant help, and willing citizens, a community can produce a useful needs assessment for very little money.

The population. When deciding which assessment technique is best, take into account the population or organization it will describe. Some methods are more suitable for obtaining information about minorities while others may have a tendency to encourage responses only from highly educated people. For example, the key informant method, whereby a few local people serve as long-time informants about the community, may be a way to build trust over time in a culturally isolated community. Although it is time-consuming, this method may be the only way to find out how a Native American community really feels about a proposed new industry.

It is critical that care be taken to anticipate who the people are that the needs assessment will describe. Community researchers should use caution in generalizing that all people in the community are alike. Specific groups are unique in the way their members will respond to an interviewer, an observer, a group discussion, or a mail questionnaire. Human sensitivity provides the best clues for determining the most appropriate methods for a specific use—how respondents will react to the needs assessment method and the person conducting it. This consideration alone may justify the use of more than one technique. The method selected should be "more like an umbrella of activity beneath which any technique may be used for gaining the desired information, and for processes of thinking about this information."[2]

[2] Leonard Schatzman and Anselm L. Strauss, *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 14.

4

Techniques
Using Existing Information

In every community there is a wide variety of information available if you know where to find it. Before new data is collected, a thorough check should be made of what is already available. This may not only add to your early understanding of the problem, but it could save time and money later. Existing records often provide insights into the community that cannot be observed or noted in any other way. This information can be found in document form, as reports, historical accounts, minutes of meetings, letters, records, and photographs.

The usefulness of existing sources varies depending on accessibility and awareness of availability. There are two types of documents: (a) primary documents, which are eyewitness accounts written or developed by people who actually experienced the particular event firsthand; and (b) secondary documents, which are developed by people who receive information from an eyewitness or by reading about it. For example, an autobiography is a primary document, while a biography is a secondary document.

The Census and vital statistics records

The U.S. Bureau of the Census conducts a population census every 10 years. Four volumes are published about each state's population, including statistics about townships, municipalities, counties, and metropolitan areas. These volumes contain information on the structure of a population (size, distribution, and composition) and on demographic processes (fertility, mortality, and migration). General social, economic, and other descriptive information is also presented. Besides the decennial information, monthly and occasional data is available in *Current Population Surveys*, available from a library or by subscription from: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

Census information is available for public use in a variety of forms, including bound publications, microfilm, and computer tape. In addition to the Census of Population, there are also Censuses of Agriculture, Housing, Business and Manufacturing, Government, and Transportation.

County and City Data Books are available from the U.S. Bureau of Census in computer tape and bound form. These combine manageable data from the censuses of population, housing, governments, and manufacturing.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of the Census and vital statistics records for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Readily available at minimal cost, if any, through local or regional libraries, courthouses, and agencies	• Data reflects only information that the respondent has been willing to share with the government
• Data available on a wide variety of characteristics: population, housing, agriculture, social, economic, health, business, manufacturing, governments, and transportation	• Data tends to be descriptive and may require the user to discriminate, sort, and correlate
• Available as bound volumes, computer tape, and microfilm	• Some figures may represent estimates or projections as opposed to actual accounts
• Can be subscribed to on a continuing basis	• Does not reveal individual values, beliefs, or reasons underlying current trends
	• Great quantity of data may overwhelm the user unless selectivity is exercised
	• Local community data is frequently limited and not always current

Vital statistics information is compiled from local, state, and national records of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and sometimes health. If vital statistics information is used along with census data, this can provide good background on many of the factors associated with population growth and decline.

Census and vital statistics records can be used in community needs assessments in many ways. They can provide an accurate description of how much the local population has grown during a certain period—and whether population growth is due to natural increase (births), or due to people moving into the community (migration).

These records can also be used to determine whether there has been a change in the number of households or in household composition.

Census and vital statistics can be used to form a detailed breakdown of community residents according to such characteristics as ethnic background, age, sex, marital status, income, education, etc.

These records can also be used to make comparisons between your community and other communities undergoing similar patterns of growth—or to determine whether your community is unique or follows state and national trends.

Sources of additional help:

Library:
- *Census Data for Community Action*. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975.
- Census reports and current population reports (various topics and continuing dates). U.S. Bureau of the Census. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- *County and City Data Books*. Federal, state, and county vital statistics reports.
- Reports and bulletins by county and state agencies dealing with planning, community affairs, employment, education, and health. (Bureau of Labor Statistics Reports; Vital and Health Statistics Series, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare publications).

Local:
- Public libraries
- Offices of city, county, or regional planning commissions
- County Extension offices
- School district offices
- College or university departments (sociology, demography, political science, planning, public health, library)
- Financial institutions
- Utility companies
- Chambers of Commerce
- Agencies and organizations responsible for health, rehabilitation, law enforcement and protection, recording vital statistics.

6

Content analysis

The aim of content analysis is to take existing documentary information, particularly that which is not statistical, and organize it into a more useful form. Content analysis can be applied to personal documents such as letters, diaries, private papers, or photographs; or to administrative records such as reports, proceedings of meetings, or hearings proceedings. It can also be applied to the analysis of newspaper articles or editorials, photographic collections, political records, or historical documents.

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of content analysis for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Allows study of subjects that otherwise might be inaccessible	• Time needed for locating suitable documents and for analysis
• Useful for determining value-interest positions, political climate, public attitudes, historical trends or sequences	• Lack of availability of material suitable for analysis
• Research atmosphere is free of personality clashes, group pressures, and other human bias factors	• Difficult to detect possible bias by original author
• Information is available locally—libraries, archives, agency files, or offices; thus research may be low-cost	• Analysis categories may not accurately represent important ideas
• Requires skills quite different from field observation, questionnaire construction, interviewing, etc.	• Possibility of recording irrelevant information, or of omitting relevant information; requires the ability to scan
• Provides opportunity for study of trends over time	• Information represents only verbal behavior (in the case of written documents)—not nonverbal behavior
• Material to be analyzed may be of high quality compared to poorly written questionnaire responses or poorly conducted interviews	

In content analysis, every attention should be given to objectivity and systematic organization. It involves developing a scheme to classify information, enabling the researcher to count particular words, themes, or ideas, or to sense sequences, patterns, or causes. Classification schemes can be in the form of checklists, index cards, or summaries. The greatest difficulty is in scanning and recording only that information which is relevant, while at the same time not overlooking anything.

Content analysis of documents or records can provide many kinds of community needs assessment information, including:

- Assessment of changes, over time, in public attitudes toward a particular development as expressed in newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, hearings proceedings, minutes of public meetings;
- Analysis of underlying causes of public dissatisfaction over public facilities and services, as shown in utility company records, agency reports, welfare case studies, tax records.

Sources of additional help:

Library:

Pitt, David C. *Using Historical Sources in Anthropology and Sociology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972.

Webb, E. J., D. T. Campbell, R. D. Schwartz, and L. Sechrest. *Onobtrusive Measures: Non-Reactive Research in the Social Sciences*, Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1966.

Bailey, Kenneth D. *Methods of Social Research*. New York: The Free Press, 1978. pp. 266-291.

Local:
Museums, libraries, church records
Newspaper archives
County offices that record land tenure, titles, sales, marriages, divorces, deaths, criminal offenses, employment
School and hospital registers and files
Planning commissions
Political institutions and organizations
Utility companies
Financial institutions
Businesses
Community organizations with special interests
Individuals' photograph albums, diaries, or collections
Family clippings, obituaries, mementos.

Techniques Using New Information

It may be necessary to go beyond existing information to assess the needs and concerns of the community, particularly under the conditions of rapid change associated with growth. Depending on the kind of information desired, there is a variety of approaches or combinations of approaches that can be used.

Techniques for collecting new information generally fall into one of three categories:

1. those mainly dependent upon observation combined with documentation;
2. those mainly dependent upon some form of questioning of individuals;
3. those mainly dependent upon some form of gathering information from a group of people.

No one method of collecting information should be viewed in isolation, for each can be strengthened by drawing on the qualities of the other methods. The persons designing the needs assessment must develop the best possible technique or combination of techniques to suit the need.

Participant observation

True participant observation requires the investigator to immerse him/herself in the life of the community being studied. The aim is to participate in the people's day-to-day activities, thereby sharing experiences, activities, language, and all community concerns. The observer's aim is to see the world through the eyes of the subjects.

The longer the participant/observer is able to share the life of the subjects, the better the chances are to accurately sense residents' perspectives. However, time and circumstances may dictate short, intermittent observer roles, or some adaptation of the participant-as-observer and the observer-as-participant.

Information can be collected in a number of ways —by watching, listening, and documenting what is seen and heard; by asking questions and entering into discussions; by sharing activities with residents and noting comments, behaviors, and reactions—or a combination of these. The great usefulness of this technique is its natural style and flexibility which, over time, can build sufficient trust to reveal insights that might otherwise not be obtained. It is essential, however, that observation and documentation be carried out systematically so that the information obtained is free of bias and relevant to the focus of the study.

Participant observation can be especially useful in the following needs assessment situations:

- Assessment of long term effects on local residents of a new industry or development;
- Determining reasons for community or organizational conflicts or misunderstandings;
- Finding new solutions to community problems;
- Learning how minorities or culturally different people feel about a community issue, and finding acceptable ways of involving them in problem solving.

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of participant observation for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Setting is natural, unstructured, and flexible	• Natural environment means the investigator has less control over the situation
• Investigator may make his/her identity known to the subjects, or researcher may keep identity a secret	• If group is aware they are being observed, resulting behavior may be affected
• Investigator may choose to actively participate in activities of those being observed, or may observe passively	• Extensive amount of time required may not be practical
• Extended time duration may add to trust level and depth of understanding	• Observations may not be valid for entire population unless a plan for representativeness is developed
• Can be combined with other techniques such as survey, key informant, community impressions, nominal group process, thereby adding to data quality	• Known observers may disrupt normal ways of living and interacting
• Useful in studying over long time period	• Training in observation skills may be essential
• Observations can be organized in advance to narrow the problem and make data more quantifiable, or the opposite approach may be taken where no preconceived restrictions are placed on observations	• Selective perception by observers may bias or limit information obtained
• A small number of people are studied to obtain in-depth information	• Observer may lose objectivity as a result of becoming involved
• Useful for studying a "small culture"—particular neighborhood, an ethnic group, the fire department, planning commission, factory assembly line, ranchers, migrant laborers, business organization	• May yield a massive amount of data which is difficult to organize or quantify
	• Does not usually yield a large population sample from which broad generalizations can be drawn

Sources of additional help:

Library:
McCall, G. J. and J. L. Simmons, eds. *Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
Schatzmann, Leonard and Anselm L. Strauss. *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973.
Bailey, Kenneth D. *Methods of Social Research*. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978. pp 215-248.
Edgerton, Robert B. and L. L. Langness. *Methods and Styles in the Study of Culture*. San Francisco, CA: Chandler and Shark Publishers, Inc., 1974.

Local:
College or university departments (anthropology, history, sociology)
Museums or libraries
Read a book by a participant-observer describing field experiences, for example:
Wax, Rosalie. *Doing Fieldwork*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1971.
Bowen, Eleanore Smith. *Return to Laughter*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.

10

Case study

The case study is a needs assessment method that can do two things: 1) it can provide in-depth information on a single unit, group, or organization; and 2) it can serve as a learning experience for a group of people who analyze the case situation. It involves the description of a few cases for the purpose of stimulating ideas, defining regularities, or reaching consensus about what is happening. Through personal discussion, mutual interaction, observation, or review of existing documents, the reporter captures the total sense of the situation. The outcome should tell a story or convey a picture about what is occurring. The case study should include:

- history and background;
- a picture of the present;
- an indication of relationships between people;
- facts taken from the ongoing situation;
- no judgmental feelings by the reporter.

After the case study is developed, it must be analyzed and diagnosed. Maximum insight will be derived from group analysis in which individuals interact with one another to answer underlying questions.

Table 4. Advantages and disadvantages of the case study for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Procedure evolves as work progresses; therefore, no confining categories or classifications	• Requires absolute accuracy; "improvements" on facts spoil the study
• Allows depth of insight into causal relationships and personal feelings	• Can be very subjective--temptation to tell more than the facts
• Applied effectively in combination with other methods, such as survey or participant observation	• Can be time-consuming; extensive amounts of data needed
• Offers unique opportunity to study an organization, a business, an agency division, particular types of families, individual differences, ideas, or principles	• Focus is on a limited number of cases; cannot necessarily be generalized to larger community
• Group analysis can become a major learning experience; potential for insight into personal ways of thinking and listening	• Not suitable as a method in isolation; best for background or as a guide to further study
	• Best case analysis is done by a group rather than by an individual
	• For best analysis, several cases are needed

Not only does this result in the accumulation of rich case data; it is also a means of obtaining information from those who are diagnosing the case. By involving a citizen group in case analysis, it is possible to learn a great deal about the community through their interpretations and reactions.

Using this approach, it is possible to develop an extensive description of a few families, community residents, plant managers, school principals, or construction workers. Ideally, this will include information about human relationships and interactions within these groups. Information can be collected solely for the purposes of the case study, or it can be drawn from existing sources such as employment records, counselors' reports, minutes of meetings, and file documents.

The case study method might be worth considering in the following circumstances:

- Several past citizen involvement efforts in planning have taken place, and you want to study the benefits achieved by the various approaches;
- The needs assessment problem has not been narrowed to something specific, such as how unemployed people are responding to new employment opportunities;
- School children appear to be under stress due to increased numbers of new students, added teacher or administration responsibilities, or crowding of facilities.

Sources of additional help:

Library:

Diesing, P. *Patterns of Discovery in the Social Sciences.* Chicago, IL: Aldine-Atherton, 1971.

Pigors, Paul and Faith Pigors. *Case Method in Human Relations: The Incident Process.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1961.

Epstein, A. L. "The Case Method in the Field of Law." *In the Craft of Social Anthropology.* A. L. Epstein ed. London: Tavistock Publications, Ltd, 1967.

Tripodi, Tony. *Uses and Abuses of Social Research in Social Work.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1974. pp. 26-29.

Local:

Caseworkers or counselors who work with families or other subject groups (Employment Security, Department of Social Health Services)

Business or industry personnel officers

Clinics, crisis centers, rehabilitation agencies, community action centers, human service organizations

Attorneys, law enforcement agencies, judicial departments

Read actual case studies that have been analyzed; for example,

Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. I, Community Involvement Processes. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976. pp. 60-129.

11

Social network analysis

Social network analysis is a means of learning more about informal relationships between people. It involves the systematic recording or diagraming of the continuous activity and interaction patterns that bind two or more people together. Using this approach, it is possible to map, over time, social links between people, groups, offices, or organizations that might otherwise not be accounted for when observing formal relationships in a social system. Mapping is based on data taken from interviews, observations, documentary analysis, or a combination of these sources.

Table 5. Advantages and disadvantages of social network analysis for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Can provide accurate, detailed information concerning interpersonal relationships over time	• Can be time-consuming in that data should be collected over time
• May provide additional insight into values, beliefs, social interaction, and lifestyles	• Continual observation and questioning may make respondent uncomfortable; may inhibit natural patterns of behavior
• A combination approach—participant observation, survey, interviews, use of existing documents—can be used to obtain a broad base of data. Interaction of researcher with community can add to total understanding	• Requires a high degree of accuracy and planning in advance
	• Usually needs to be supplemented with other forms of data such as personal interviews, or interviews with other informed people
	• Problem of knowing what key individuals to focus on

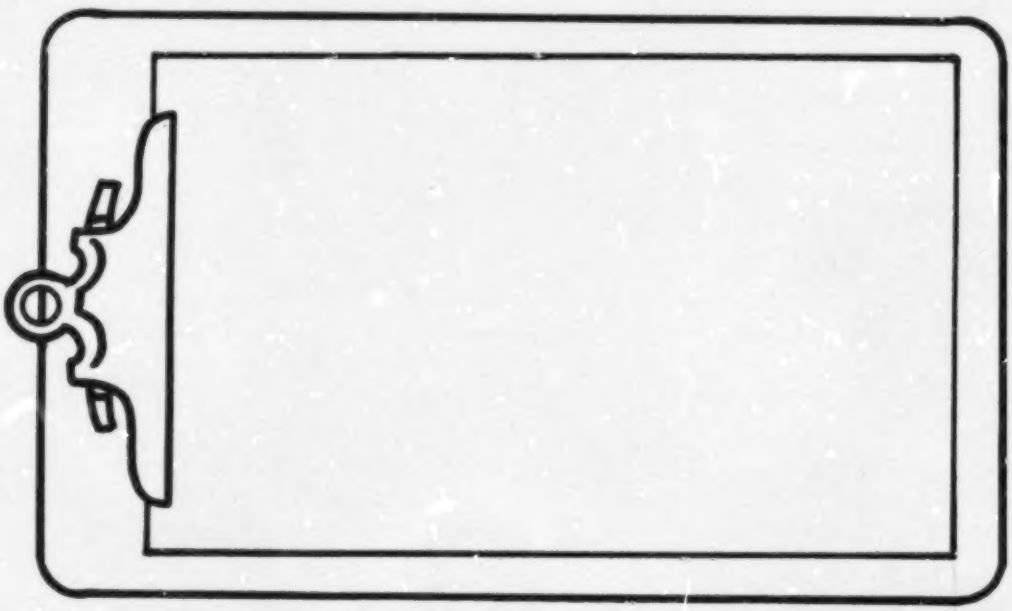
In a rapidly changing community, social network analysis could be used for the following reasons:

- To learn whether friendship patterns and helping relationships are being established between newcomers and long term residents;
- To look at changes in community leadership—who are the respected authorities, who is sought for advice, what are the problem-solving networks, who participates in volunteer organizations;
- To study how a migrant population adapts to the new community—support relationships, friendships, ties to old communities, barriers to integration, type of community issues they become involved in and how;
- To gain insight into a formal organization and how informal social systems operate within it, for example, the planning commission, the planning office, the city council, special interest boards, advocacy groups.

Sources of additional help:

Library: Pelto, Pertti J. and Gretel H. Pelto. *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, Second Edition. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
Mitchell, J. C., ed. *Social Networks in Urban Situations*. Manchester, England: Manchester Press, 1969.
Boissevain, Jeremy. *Friends of Friends*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd, 1974.

Local: Professionals trained in sociology, human relations, anthropology, political science, social geography
Citizen participation specialists associated with volunteer organizations, planning and community development agencies, special interest groups.



Survey

The survey technique is unique in that it is the only needs assessment method—other than talking to every citizen—that has the potential of representing all people in the community. In this respect, it is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number of people. If a survey is well-designed and implemented, the results can be generalized to a larger population.

The survey is based on information collected from a sample of the total community population. On the other hand, a survey can be administered to all people in a community or organization to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to express themselves. The most commonly used survey methods are person-to-person interviews, drop-off and pick-up questionnaires, mail questionnaires, and telephone interviews. While each approach is somewhat different, the format is similar. Each asks an individual to supply attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and attributes in response to specific questions.

Survey design offers flexibility in the types of questions that may be asked—ranging from structured yes-no-undecided responses to unstructured, open-ended responses. Therefore, the survey can be sensitive to psychological barriers, such as length of survey, wording, type of person administering it, and confidentiality, that might affect response.

In some situations, there may be opposition to the use of surveys as a result of recent and continuous misuse of the method. People may not be interested in participating in surveys because there have been too many surveys conducted, many of which may have been poorly designed. Another objection might be that people are afraid to talk to interviewers for fear of fraud, robbery, or assault; or that people do not want their privacy invaded. Minorities, in particular, may feel they have been surveyed to death with few results.

The focus of the survey must be kept in mind, and questions limited to specific and clearly defined informational needs. For example, a community needs assessment survey could be used to:

- Search for alternative solutions to community problems;
- Solicit citizen reactions to specific solutions to community problems and proposals for action;
- Solicit citizen opinions concerning proposed goals for community development;
- Gather information on citizens' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions in order to identify and prioritize community problems;
- Measure changes in attitudes about an attempted solution to a community problem;
- Attempt to make citizens more aware of community problems and their ramifications;
- Assess citizen attitudes about spending public funds on specific projects.

Community researchers are advised to delay the construction of a survey until enough is known about the social and cultural context within the community.

Table 6. Advantages and disadvantages of the survey for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Can be inexpensive—especially if volunteers are available to conduct the survey, or records and data exist to draw from	• To assure statistical meaning, random samples must be carefully selected
• A small, randomly selected sample can provide much information about a population	• Results may not be valid if survey is not designed correctly
• Techniques—mail survey, telephone survey, personal interview, drop-off and pick-up survey—may be selected in relation to desired cost or response rate	• May require time and expertise to develop the survey, train interviewers, conduct interviews, and analyze results
• Can be used to survey an entire population and provide an opportunity for many persons to feel involved in decision-making process	• Subject to misinterpretation depending on how questions and response categories are designed
• Can be used to record behaviors as well as opinions, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and attributes	• Tendency for scope of data to be limited—omission of underlying reasons, and actual behavioral patterns
• Useful if combined with another method—such as participant observation or case study—that will provide an interactive perspective or detail	

Sources of additional help:

Library:

Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. II, A Catalog of Techniques. U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976. pp. 240-279.

Warheit, George J., Roger A. Bell, and John J. Schwab. *Needs Assessment Approaches: Concepts and Methods.* Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1977. pp. 39-49.

Dillman, Don A. *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method.* New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1978.

Webb, K. and H. Hatry. *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Government.* Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute (2100 M Street, Washington, D.C. 20037), 1973.

Warren, Roland L. *Studying Your Community.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1955.

Local:

Health, social, and health service or planning agencies

College or university departments of sociology, community development, Extension

Review actual community surveys that have been done.

Key informant

The key informant method is based on obtaining information, over time, from a community resident who is in a position to know the community well. The person or persons selected to be key informants must therefore have a broad knowledge of the community, its services, and its people. It is an excellent way to recover information about past events or ways of life that are no longer observable.

The objectives of the needs assessment can help determine the most appropriate kind of person(s) to act as key informant. The researcher might consider public officials, longtime residents, business managers, administrators, church leaders, and persons representing a variety of life styles, ages, viewpoints, or ethnic backgrounds. Few people in a community will be able to speak about everything; therefore, the problem should be in focus before the informant is selected.

Table 7. Advantages and disadvantages of the key informant method for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Opportunity to establish rapport and trust and thus obtain the insiders' view	• Time required to select the best informants and to build trust
• Depth of information concerning causes or reasons	• Personal relationship between researcher and informants may influence type of data obtained
• Permits continual clarification of ideas and information	• Informants may interject their own impressions and biases
• Can be combined effectively with other techniques such as participant observation, life history, community impressions, survey	• Jealousies and resentment on the part of other community members whose opinions are not solicited may develop
• Permits input from many different individuals	• Data may be difficult to quantify unless well organized as it comes in
• Can be implemented by community volunteers, thereby building a citizen involvement and awareness	• Should be combined with other methods, because representativeness of total community is difficult to achieve
• Does not involve the high cost of printing and data analysis	• Few people can sense all the needs and concerns of all people in a community —the perspectives of those who are less visible may be overlooked

The key informant method requires sufficient time to build a good relationship between investigator and informant. The value of the method is the type of data that can be elicited as a result of the communication and trust that develops between the two. The quality of information obtained is dependent on the ability of the investigator to draw out the key informant's capabilities in perceiving and communicating the information needed.

A variety of methods can be derived for working with a key informant. Questions can be developed in advance, as on a questionnaire or outline, or the approach can be totally unstructured and spontaneous. Several methods applied in combination may produce the best results, including survey, participant observation, and citizen advisory group discussion. Because of its intensive and personal nature, the key informant method is especially useful for:

- Obtaining a deeper knowledge of minority viewpoints, or of silent majority opinions;
- Involving citizens in public problem-solving who would be less inclined to answer a questionnaire;
- Raising citizen consciousness about a community problem;
- Showing formal community leaders that a citizen organization is committed to obtaining their viewpoints.

Sources of additional help:

Library: Pelto, Pertti J. and Gretel Pelto. *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*. Second Edition. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
Warheit, George J., Robert A. Bell, and John J. Schwab. *Needs Assessment Approaches: Concepts and Methods*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1977. pp. 20-22.

Local: People trained in anthropology or ethnography—might be found in libraries, museums, schools, universities, or human service organizations
Knowledgeable local people—such as local officials, religious leaders, bankers, administrators, leaders of public service organizations, professionals, ethnic group leaders—who have the respect and acceptance of residents.

14

Life history

The life history method usually involves the collection of biographies or detailed histories on a few selected members of the community. It can also be applied to the histories of families, organizations, or agency departments. Through intensive interviews with individuals, supplemented by documentary evidence, it is possible to obtain rich data about past events and customs, and individual perspectives of what the community is like and how his/her life has been affected by it. It is a unique way of seeing the community through the eyes and feelings of a resident.

The life history approach can reveal a vast amount of information about such things as: community opportunity structures, social norms, unacceptable patterns of behavior, significant life cycle events, valued community activities and rituals, individual or family mobility patterns, effects of developments, trends in leadership, power structure, and community factors that might foster social and economic problems—barriers to employment, neighborhood vandalism, teenage depression, child abuse, family stress, and marital problems.

The use of the life history to study an organization or group should not be overlooked. For example, the detailed history of a planning commission, city council, or merchants' association can reveal a lot about the character of the community, residents' social and economic backgrounds, patterns of power and influence, and possible problem-solving strategies.

Table 8. Advantages and disadvantages of the life history method for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• May motivate the involvement of shy or uninvolved people, in that every individual is an expert when it comes to his or her own life history	• Rarely representative of total community or group
• Permits micro-level examination of representatives of the population and therefore great depth of detail	• Time-consuming if large data base is developed
• Can provide insights into unique variables or characteristics to which large surveys may be insensitive	• Can be subjective unless all life histories are structured systematically; excessive structure eliminates the primary advantage of open-ended spontaneity
• May reveal chance factors or clues that otherwise would not be identified, such as historic family jealousies, or childhood resentments affecting present attitudes and beliefs	• Ideally suited for older residents of the population, thus may be biased according to the backgrounds and values of this group
• Can be complimentary to other methods, such as survey, key informant, participant observation	• Need for extreme confidentiality
	• Can provide such a large amount of qualitative data that it may be difficult to quantify results
	• Requires a skilled investigator who can guide the informant in revealing significant social system variables

Sources of additional help:

Library: Langness, L. L. *The Life History of Anthropological Science.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
Washington State Oral/Rural History Program Interviewer's Manual. Olympia, WA: Washington State, Division of Archives and Record Management, 1974.
Baum, Willa. *Transcribing and Editing Oral History.* Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977.
Dailey, Charles A. *Assessment of Lives.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1971.

Local: People trained in history, geneology, anthropology, counseling, or health sciences
People associated with museums or archives
Historical societies or groups interested in oral history and geneology collection
Read an actual life history:
Lewis, Oscar. *The Children of Sanchez.* New York, NY: Random House, 1961.

Nominal group process

Nominal group process is a structured problem-solving or idea-generating strategy in which individuals' ideas are gathered and combined in a face-to-face nonthreatening group situation. The process is used in health, social service, and education fields, as well as in industry and government to maximize creative participation in group problem-solving. It assures a balanced input from all participants and takes advantage of each person's knowledge and experience. In a needs assessment, it is useful for generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, prioritizing, and making decisions on proposed alternative actions.

While the nominal group process can be varied, one approach might be for members of a small group to write their individual ideas on paper. Round-robin feedback from each person then follows, with each person's concerns being listed on a flip chart in full view; next, each idea is discussed for clarification and evaluation. Priorities are ordered by silent balloting; group discussion of the ballot results would round out the process.

A community advisory group or task force might consider using a nominal group process technique under these circumstances:

- To determine what community problems are of greatest immediate concern;
- To decide on a needs assessment strategy for dealing with the identified problems;
- To design improved community services or programs;
- At a community forum or town meeting where broad citizen input is needed on a proposed plan for land use, transportation, public services, or school expansion.

Table 9. Advantages and disadvantages of nominal group process for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• If well-organized in advance, a heterogeneous group can move toward definite group conclusions	• Requires a skilled leader
• Can be used to expand the data obtained from surveys or existing documents, or can be used to generate a more specific survey	• May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless advance preparation has taken place to train group facilitators and divide participants into groups of 6-10 members
• Motivates all participants to get involved because they sense they are personally affected	• Process may appear rigid if group leader does not show flexibility—encourage agenda building, and show respect for all ideas and concerns
• Generates many ideas in a short period of time: allows for a full range of individual thoughts and concerns	• May be some overlap of ideas due to unclear wording or inadequate group discussion
• A good way to obtain input from people of different backgrounds and experiences	• "Knowledgeable" individuals selected to participate may not represent all community subgroups
• Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a nonthreatening setting	• Assertive personalities may dominate unless leadership skills are exercised
• Allows individual generation of ideas without supression by any dominant group member	• May not be a sufficient source of data in itself; may require follow-up survey, observations, or documentary analysis
• Stimulates creative thinking and effective dialogue	• Inappropriate technique for routine meetings, bargaining, negotiation, or coordination
• Allows for clarification of ideas	

Sources of additional help:

Library: Delbecq, Andre, Andrew Van de Ven, and David Gustafson. *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes.* Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1975.

Van de Ven, Andrew and Andre Delbecq. *Guidelines for Leaders in Conducting Nominal Group Meetings.* Madison, WI: Center for the Study of Program Administration, 1971.

Local: People specialized in citizen participation, group process facilitation, or leadership training in social and health services, Extension, education, industry, and planning.

16

Delphi Technique

The delphi technique is another way of obtaining group input for ideas and problem-solving. Unlike the nominal group process, the delphi does not require face-to-face participation. It uses a series of carefully designed questionnaires interspersed with information summaries and feedback from preceding responses.

In a planning situation, the delphi can be used to:

- Develop a number of alternatives;
- Assess the social and economic impacts of rapid community growth;
- Explore underlying assumptions or background information leading to different judgments;
- Seek out information on which agreement may later be generated;
- Correlate informed judgments on a subject involving many disciplines;
- Educate respondents on the diverse and interrelated elements of a topic.

The delphi begins with the initial development of a questionnaire focusing on the identified problem. An appropriate respondent group is selected, then the questionnaire is mailed to them. Each participant answers the questionnaire independently and returns it. The initiators of the questionnaire summarize responses, then develop a feedback summary and a second questionnaire for the same respondent group. After reviewing the feedback summary, respondents independently rate priority ideas included in the second questionnaire, then mail back the responses. The process is repeated until investigators feel positions are firm and agreement on a topic is reached. A final summary report is issued to the respondent group. The delphi can be modified in many ways.

In assessing community needs, the delphi technique could be used for many of the same things as the nominal group process—determining and prioritizing community problems; setting goals; designing needs assessment strategies; planning a conference or community forum; developing improved community services; evaluating alternative plans for community development; or aggregating judgments of special-interest or mutually hostile groups.

Table 10. Advantages and disadvantages of the delphi technique for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Allows participants to remain anonymous	• Judgments are those of a selected group of people and may not be representative
• Inexpensive	• Tendency to eliminate extreme positions and force a middle-of-the-road consensus
• Free of social pressure, personality influence, and individual dominance	• More time-consuming than the group process method
• A reliable judgment or forecast results	• Should not be viewed as a total solution to forecasting
• Allows sharing of information and reasoning among participants	• Requires skill in written communication
• Conducive to independent thinking and gradual formulation	• Requires adequate time and participant commitment (about 30-45 days)
• A well-selected respondent panel—a mix of local officials, knowledgeable individuals, members of impacted community, regional officials, academic social scientists, etc.—can provide a broad analytical perspective on potential growth impacts	
• Can be used to reach consensus among groups hostile to each other	

Sources of additional help:

Library: Delbecq, Andre, Andrew Van de Ven, and David Gustafson. *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1975.

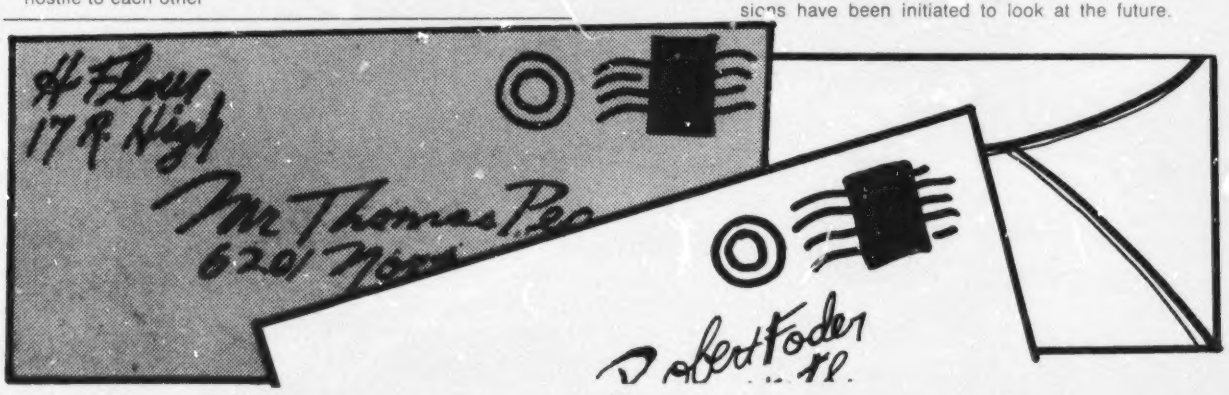
Kaufman, Jerome and David Gustafson. *Multi-County Land Use Policy Formation: A Delphi Analysis*. Technical Report of the Department of Industrial Engineering, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, 1973.

Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. II, A Catalog of Techniques. U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976. pp. 188-212.

Local: College or university departments of sociology, political science, planning, economics

Major businesses and industries that do forecasting, innovative planning

Governors' offices where task forces and commissions have been initiated to look at the future.



Advisory groups and task forces

Advisory groups and task forces are called together for a variety of purposes—to represent the ideas and attitudes of a community, group, or organization; to make suggestions; to generate new ideas; to advise and to recommend; or to carry out a specific task. Members of such a group may be specially selected or invited to participate because of their unique skills or backgrounds; they may volunteer; they may be nominated or elected; or the group may be formed by a combination of these processes.

Because advisory groups and task forces are formed in a variety of ways, a number of things should be considered in advance:

- Composition and selection. Will it be made up of experts, lay persons, or a combination of both? How will membership be determined? What are advantages and disadvantages of each person to the function of the group?
- Purpose. Will the group be formed for the purpose of information dissemination, information collection, planning, advising, problem resolution, decision-making, policy-making, technical assistance, legitimizing or building support, or creating public awareness?
- Duration. Will there be a beginning and an end to the group's responsibilities? How will length of members' service be determined?
- Method of operation. Will there be regular and frequent meetings, occasional meetings, delphi-type communication by mail, conference telephone calls, or a combination of these? Who will assume leadership? How will recommended actions or plans be implemented?
- Motivation and reward. How will participants be rewarded for their input? How will their interest in the group's task be developed and retained?

Table 11. Advantages and disadvantages of advisory groups and task forces for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Opportunity to involve a variety of professional and lay people from diverse backgrounds	• Maximizing the skills of group members may take considerable and time-consuming organization, planning, and training
• Lay people may see alternatives that are overlooked by experts	• Requires a skilled facilitator or leader
• Local residents may have technical expertise or knowledge, particularly about the community in which they live, that professionals do not have	• May result in frustration if participants' advice is never taken or if they have no justifiable reason for participation
• Increasing numbers of people are demanding to be involved in planning; they cannot be ignored	• Members may become disillusioned if they have not had clear instructions for the reason for participation in the group
• When programs go wrong, people who have been involved in planning them have less reason to blame officials for the problems	• Depending upon selection, members may not necessarily represent all points of view or all members of the community
• Can be an antidote for feelings of alienation, futility, and powerlessness	• May threaten decision-makers, planning officials, and others in formal organizational roles
• Involvement in the planning process often assures acceptance in the implementation phase	• Sometimes there is a tendency to overload advisory committees with busy work
• Takes the pressure off the experts; they do not need to have all the answers	• Viewed from perspective of a citizen advisory committee, there may be a tendency to regard it as the only means for obtaining citizen input. Should be considered as one of several methods to obtain public participation
• Usually results in more creative problem-solving	
• May help solidify relationships between a broad group of professionals, politicians, and lay people —communication barriers are broken down and mutual trust increases	

Advisory groups and task forces, especially those of a short-term or specific task orientation, can be invaluable to a community needs assessment. Their functions include:

- Identifying methods for conducting a needs assessment;
- Building community awareness of specific problems;
- Identifying various population and organization groups that should be involved in a community needs assessment;
- Building support for a new public service program;
- Assessing potential impacts of a development;
- Collecting information;
- Evaluating a community program or policy;
- Giving technical assistance or advice.

Sources of additional help:

Library:

Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. II, A Catalog of Techniques. U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976. pp. 20-63.

Communication—Key to Participatory Regional Planning: The Design of Policy Development Tools. Seattle, WA: Puget Sound Governmental Conference, 1970.

Planning and Design Workbook for Community Participation. Research Center for Urban and Environmental Planning. Princeton, NJ: School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Princeton University, 1969.

Brown, David. "The Management of Advisory Committees: An Assignment for the '70's." *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July-August), 1972. pp. 334-342.

Local:

Government agencies mandated to involve citizens in planning, departments of community planning, health and social services, ecology, water resources, highways

Educational institutions, departments and organizations such as Extension service, libraries, school districts.

18

Community forum

Table 12. Advantages and disadvantages of the community forum for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Provides an opportunity for people of diverse backgrounds to share ideas and experiences	• Requires good leadership and advance organization
• Can provide a quick, intensive picture of community concerns	• Opinions obtained are limited to those who attend —all viewpoints may not be heard
• Can effectively involve local citizens in planning, publicizing, moderating, evaluating, etc.	• Poor advance planning and advertising may result in limited participation
• Gives community issues broad visibility	• If not well-facilitated, only the vocal minorities will be heard
• Local citizens feel as though they have been heard	• A large turnout may prevent everyone from speaking and may limit time allowed for each speaker
• Inexpensive	• May generate more questions than answers
• Useful to identify problems, assess needs, or to suggest questions requiring further study	• May raise citizens' expectations and frustrations if objectives are unclear, or if expectations are not met
• Design is flexible—a variety of techniques can be incorporated	

A community forum is based on one or more public meetings to which residents are invited to express their opinions about community problems and needs. With advance planning and the assistance of a steering committee, an enormous amount of information can be obtained in a short time at minimal cost. Skilled leadership and advance organization is needed to motivate a representative public turnout, to assure maximum participation, to collect information, and to know what to do with the information once it is collected. Usually, the format incorporates a number of needs assessment techniques, such as nominal group process, key informant, advisory committee, and possibly a follow-up survey. It has the potential to narrow the problem on which a later technique may elaborate; to build public awareness of the complexity of an issue; to legitimize the need for further study; to design improved programs and services; or to test public views of proposed solutions to community problems.

Sources of additional help:

Library: Warheit, George J., Roger A. Bell, and John J. Schwab. *Needs Assessment Approaches: Concepts and Methods*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1977. pp. 22-25.

Local: See citations under needs assessment techniques that will be used in the community forum.

19

Community impressions

Table 13. Advantages and disadvantages of the community impressions technique for community needs assessment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Provides input directly from people most likely affected by a development, such as neighborhood associations, teachers, business people, the elderly, minorities	• Does not provide a representative sample of attitudes
• Allows for probing behind conclusions, resulting in a better understanding of causal relationships	• Process for eliciting the data requires skillful planning and facilitating
• Can be combined with statistical data and a community forum, providing a richer data base and a greater validity of findings	• Time is needed for compiling data
• If individual appointments are made, allows the possibility of obtaining input from busy, knowledgeable, and influential people	• In a face-to-face setting, wide variation in participants' background may supress contributions of quieter, less confident people
• Can provide a comfortable, supportive atmosphere in which friends discuss an issue together, where it might not be possible to interview the same individuals alone	• Data is dependent on willingness of people to participate
• Group setting may stimulate thinking and discussion	

The community impressions approach is a small-group strategy for obtaining opinions or impressions of what the larger community is thinking. It is rather like applying nominal group process or delphi techniques to a group of key informants. Because the informants do not necessarily have to meet as a group, the community impressions approach can also provide opportunity for extensive taped discussions, by appointment, with leaders and influentials.

In a rapidly growing community, the community impression approach could be used to solicit expert opinion about anticipated social and economic impacts of a development; how to solve a technical problem such as inadequate transportation; or how to test the feasibility of a new program or facility. Ideally, the community impressions approach should be combined with another technique that draws upon more representative data, such as survey, community forum, or existing community documents.

Sources of additional help:

Library: *Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning, Vol. II, A Catalog of Techniques.* U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, Socio-Economic Studies Division, 1976. pp. 213-239.

Wells, W. D. "Group interviewing," in *The Handbook of Marketing Research*, R. Ferber, ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

Goldman, A. E. "The Group Depth Interview," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 26. pp. 61-68.

Local: Rehabilitation and mental health therapists and counselors

Social and health service agency personnel

Professionals in business and industry involved in making consumer marketing forecasts

Professionals in state government departments who organize consumer panels, neighborhood panels

Personnel officers in private business or industry.

20

Application

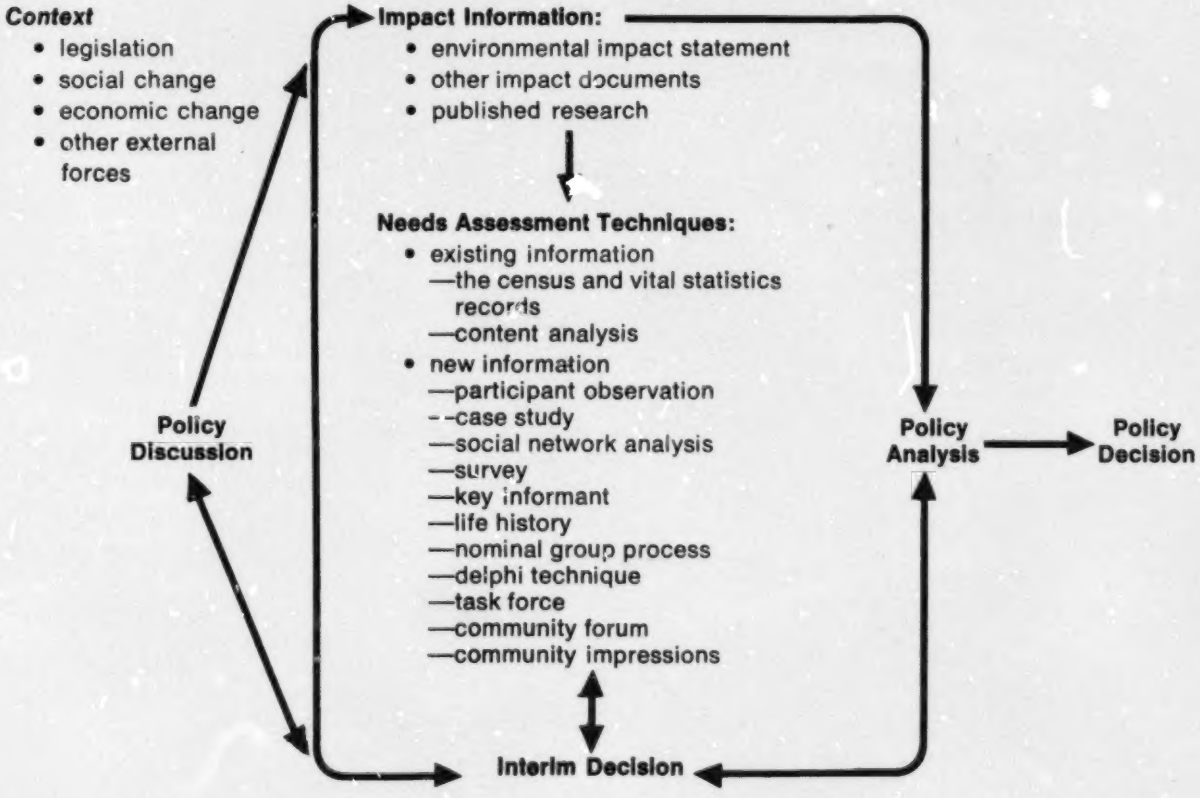
As a means of summarizing our discussion of needs assessment techniques, we will apply selected methods to a community setting where rapid growth is being anticipated. We will build upon an approach developed by Dillman (1977) and later applied by Garkovich (1979). Our model is based upon the use of multiple needs assessment methods as a key component in making data-based policy decisions.

In 1976, the Washington Water Power Company announced their plans to hopefully begin construction in 1983 on the first of four coal-fired generating plants in a rural area of eastern Washington near Creston. Over the decade of 1983-1993, a sizable construction force would be working on the four projects, which represent an anticipated investment of $2-3 billion.

Creston is an agricultural trade center located in Lincoln County, which has a primarily agricultural base. Creston is on a state highway approximately 56 miles from Spokane, a major eastern Washington city.

As shown in the figure, the context for policy discussions with regard to the impacts of growth upon towns like Creston also includes legislation and other forces, such as the increasing demand for energy, in an external environment. In the case of Creston, the National Environmental Policy Act and Washington state legislation provided a context for generating needed information and a framework for negotiating with the energy developer.

Historically, Creston and the county in which it is located are quite typical of most American communities which have a primarily agricultural base. Lincoln County reached its population peak in 1910 with 17,539 residents, and then consistently declined in population to a low of 9,300 in 1975. Creston, which is one of several small municipalities in Lincoln County, has had a fairly stable population base —growing from 308 in 1910 to its present level of 350. Creston is 20 miles from Davenport, a community of approximately 1,600 residents, which is the county seat and location of the hospital and major shopping area for northern Lincoln County.



Data-based policy decisions in rapidly growing communities using needs assessment techniques.

21

Creston residents appear to enjoy life in their community and in rural Washington. There is some concern, however, about the proposed new energy facilities, the threat of railroad abandonment to their present agricultural economy, the need for more paved streets, the need for improved mail service, and the need for an improved water system. In addition, prior to 1979, the community did not have a comprehensive plan which could be used as a guide for local decisionmaking about the community's future.

In 1979, the mayor of Creston, working in cooperation with members of the Creston Planning Commission, approached the area Extension agent serving Lincoln County about doing a needs assessment survey. Such a survey, they reasoned, could be a means for getting a broad base of citizen input into the planning process and provide objective indicators of human needs within a community that is anticipating rapid growth. Using the resources of Washington State University Cooperative Extension and other educational institutions, a survey was completed in 1979. The survey provided substantial information on citizen attitudes about proposed goals for the community, perceptions about possible and actual community problems and knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about the proposed energy development, as well as other changes occurring in the area. The survey helped citizens become more aware of problems and possible solutions, and provided information to help planning commission members and elected governmental officials make better policy decisions.

The survey is only one method of generating useful information about citizen needs in communities where rapid growth is expected or occurring. In the case of Creston, a committee of persons representing a cross-section of community members was formed to help with the process of impact assessment and mitigation. The Creston Project Committee, as it has been called, was set up to function as both an advisory group and a task force. Although impact committees of this type can be extremely helpful, it is prudent to review the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches. For example, while many professionals and laypersons may be involved on the impact committee, it may be possible that members will not have the necessary time or the expertise to thoroughly assess and understand the critical fiscal and sociocultural impacts which may occur as a result of the proposed energy development.

As stressed above, information generated by *advisory groups* and *task forces* can be supplemented using other methods, and such groups can employ many different techniques for generating the information which they will then evaluate. The summary figure emphasizes combining existing sources of information such as *census* and *vital statistics* data with new sources of information to aid in the process of policy analysis in communities like Creston. In addition to the use of *surveys*, several other methods provide essential supplementary and complementary new information for decisionmakers. The *Delphi method* can be very useful for obtaining expert opinion on needs and problems related to the impacts of rapid growth, while the *key informant method* will be useful for identifying the unique needs of minorities, the youth, or the elderly. *Community forums* will be helpful for informing people about growth-related issues and generating further information about needs and perceptions, while *nominal group process* methods will be helpful in small-group settings for obtaining lists of problems, ideas, and proposals for action.

In the case of Creston, the results of these needs assessments as well as the results of the earlier survey could provide the information base for developing subsequent and more refined surveys which can be useful when tightening up policies and making specific recommendations (see Dillman, 1977, and Garkovich, 1979). The bottom line is that multiple methods should be used when carrying out a needs assessment—or many people and potential problem areas will fall through the slats.

Sources of additional help:

Library: Dillman, Don A. "Preference Surveys and Policy Decisions: Our New Tools Need Not Be Used in the Same Old Way," in *Journal of the Community Development Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring, 1977; 31-43.

Garkovich, Lorraine. "What Comes After the Survey?: A Practical Application of the Synchronized Survey Model in Community Development," in *Journal of the Community Development Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring, 1979: 29-38.

This publication is part of the "Coping with Growth" series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:

- Evaluating Fiscal Impact Studies: Community Guidelines
- Minimizing Public Costs of Residential Growth
- Coping with Rapid Growth: A Community Perspective
- Interagency Coordination and Rapid Community Growth
- The Public Policy Process: Its Role in Community Growth
- Economic Multipliers: Can a Rural Community Use Them?
- Incoming Population: Where Will the People Live?
- Citizen Involvement Strategies in Community Growth Issues
- Growth Impacts on Public Service Expenditures
- Assessing Fiscal Impact of Rural Growth
- Programming Capital Improvements
- What Does the Impact Statement Say About Economic Impacts?
- Population Change: Do You Know the Trends in Your Community?

Copies may be obtained from the Extension Service at cooperating institutions or from the Western Rural Development Center in Corvallis, Oregon.

22

WREP A Western Regional Extension Publication

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Henry Wadsworth, director, Oregon State University Extension Service. Other western state Extension directors include James W. Matthews, University of Alaska; Craig S. Oliver, University of Arizona; J. B. Kendrick, Jr., University of California; Lowell H. Watts, Colorado State University; Noel P. Kefford, University of Hawaii; James L. Graves, University of Idaho; Carl J. Hoffman, Montana State University; Dale W. Bohmont, University of Nevada; L. S. Pope, New Mexico State University; Clark Ballard, Utah State University; J. O. Young, Washington State University; and Harold J. Tuma, University of Wyoming. The University of Guam Extension Service, Wilfred P. Leon Guerrero, director, also participates. Extension invites participation in its programs and offers them to all people without discrimination.